

Syria and Assad's secular sectarianism

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The manipulation of sectarianism was one of the methods used by the Syrian regime to preserve its control over the decades. The interdiction against sectarian discourses, under the guise of nationalism and secularism, was but a cover for the authoritarian and sectarian practices of its security establishment.

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The Syrian regime did not invent sectarianism in Syria. Sectarian discourses were always part of the national political climate in Syria's modern history. This can be explained by the fact that since the early formation of the Syrian republic (1920-1946) the country never had a truly nationalist authority, nor did it have specific national policies that aimed to dilute sectarian, religious, ethnic and other sub-national rivalries in favour of an encompassing Syrian nationalism. This inevitably contributed to the creation of a state of latent, or hidden, sectarianism. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that the leftist and secular political elite (1950-70s) did not consider sectarianism a major issue worthy of public discussion. On the contrary, they actively ignored it in the false belief that it would dissipate on its own.

This state of 'hidden sectarianism' is terribly problematic. Firstly, it is not a clear phenomenon that can be studied and analysed, because everyone is simply loathe to discuss it, or even to acknowledge its existence, in public; nor is it a passing phase into a more advanced national state. This ambiguity was fertile ground for the Baathist regime to successfully use sectarianism, along with other methods, to reinforce its rule for many decades.

The elephant in the room

Under Baath rule, discourses and discussions on sectarianism, regardless of their shape or content, were completely banned on national media and in the public sphere. Concurrently, however, positions within the ruling class and the armed forces were divided informally between different sects. For example, the prime minister was chosen, historically, from the Sunni elite, while Alawites enjoyed four different cabinet posts, most important of which is the ministry of information; other groups, like Christians and Druze, also had their assigned cabinets. Within the army, leading positions in brigades and divisions were assigned through an unwritten but well known formula—to Syrians at least: if the leader is Sunni, it means that the deputy must be Alawite, while a third leading position is reserved for other groups like Christians or Druze. The only exception to this formula was in the security forces, where Alawites always enjoyed a comfortable majority both in numbers and in leadership positions.

This unspoken division of roles made sectarianism a presence that was constantly felt, while the prohibition of any discussion of sectarianism was absolute. The accusation of 'causing sectarian

division' was laid down against all kinds of political opposition groups and was used in the prosecution and imprisonment of large numbers of individuals; thus facilitating the regime's monopoly over the issue. People had to find different ways to navigate around this deadly elephant in the room.

This control was punctuated further by the intentional policies implemented by the security establishment in Syria to separate people based on sect, religion and ethnic criteria. This is illustrated by the encouragement given to segregated areas like the city of Baniyas, which is divided into an Alawite section and a Sunni one; or the town of Qutayfah, where the Army officers' neighborhood (which is mostly Alawite) is separated by a fence from the majority-Sunni town. This geographical separation can be seen in many other areas in Damascus like Jaramana (Christian/Druze), Mazzeh 86 (Alawite), Harasta (Sunni). These areas were not completely homogeneous, but they were established in the Syrian consciousness as such, and thus was established a social state of "sectarian neighbourly" relations according to the thinker Yassin al-Hafez. This "sectarian formation of society" allowed the regime the "exclusive role of managing interactions between the groups and minimised all other independent interactions", according to the writer, Yassin al-Haj Saleh. Even if, as some might argue, these social relations were already inherent in Syrian society, rather than actively promoted by the regime, the responsibility remains with the ruling class in not implementing any integration policies to counter this trend.

The brotherhood boost

The political monopoly over sectarianism tightened after the Hama uprising against the regime in 1982. With the Muslim Brotherhood appointing themselves as representatives of Sunnis in Syria and throughout the region, while referring to the Assad regime as "the Alawite regime", they provided the regime with the perfect alibi. From then on, the regime would crush any discussion on sectarianism with secular slogans, and would present itself as the only guarantor for the protection of minorities, especially Alawites. This phase is recounted in the book, *Politique et minorités au Proche-Orient: Les raisons d'une explosion*, by Annie and Laurent Chabry:

"In August 1980, Hafez al-Assad chose to celebrate Ramadan in Qardaha, instead of in the Damascus Umayyad mosque, which was what tradition demanded. He surrounded himself with the most prominent leaders from the Alawite community and requested their help in handling the crisis."

This sectarian shift can be appreciated in the testimony of the Syrian poet Faraj Bayrakdar, at the time a central committee member of the underground Communist Action Party, who was imprisoned several times by the Assad regime:

"The first time I was imprisoned, in 1978, there were no sectarian insults. When I was arrested again, in 1987, sectarian insults against prisoners were the norm."

The strategy of manipulating sectarianism can be seen in countless examples of Syria's recent past. In 2006, writer Michel Kilo was imprisoned for an article entitled 'Syrian obituaries', where he wrote:

"Although sects underly Syrian society, no one dares talk about them. Not because they ignore their existence, but out of fear of the authorities, which claim to have neutralized all sectarian and ideological differences and treat any talk on these issues as treason."

Similarly, political dissident Riad Seif was arrested during the period known as the Damascus Spring for stating that "the Syrian people are characterized by their diverse ethnic and religious universe.

Syria is the cradle of monotheistic religions and ancient civilizations.”

According to many witness testimonies, it became a common strategy from the 1980’s onwards, for security forces to deck walls with sectarian slogans such as, “We want to overthrow the Alawite regime” a night before they stormed a neighbourhood to arrest members of the Communist Action Party or other political groups from their hometowns.

This regime’s strategy pursued three goals:

1. To present itself as the only guarantor against sectarianism
2. To strengthen its ties with the country’s minorities
3. To tarnish the reputation of dissidents and opposition groups

The aforementioned examples give an overview of the instrumentalisation of sectarianism by the Syrian regime. The evidence suggests that the regime was never a sectarian authority, as that would entail focusing all efforts on elevating the conditions of a particular sect, as is the case in the Saudi and the Iranian regimes. In Syria’s case, sectarianism was but one card out of many used to perpetuate the ruling elite’s dominant position.

The actions and policies of any state, however, will transform society politically, economically and socially. In Syria, it led to the birth of what I call “hidden sectarianism”, where sectarian identities are neither discarded for a higher national identity, nor are they allowed to present themselves and be discussed openly. This national identity crisis was made clear a few months after the uprising, partly because the regime decided to put its weight behind the sectarian narrative, and partly because the opposition, in an ultimately misguided move, attempted to play the sectarian card as a weapon against the regime.

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P.S.

- Syria Untold. 28 November 2014:
<https://syriauntold.com/2014/11/28/assads-secular-sectarianism/>
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